2: Boissevain E-5 (1960-1961) 1965
EZ6 Malta EZ6

IV

Even when a parish is not competing with another for some honour, the decoration of the parish church is a matter of great concern to the village. As we have already observed, a parish church is more than just a central place of worship; it is the centre of most of the social life of a village and the repository of its collective wealth. The building itself, with its gilded ceilings and silver altar fronts, its damask tapestries and embroidered vestments, its precious votive offerings and ornate statues, represents a fortune amassed over centuries from the savings and bequests of countless inhabitants. The parish church is thus the embodiment of village history, a showpiece which all, even the most anti-clerical Labour supporters, point out with great pride to strangers.

The custodian of the church is the parish priest, who is responsible for all alterations or improvements to it. He often delegates much of this work, especially the fund-raising, to a local priest, who then becomes procurator of the church. Many church procurators devote their lives to building and beautifying their churches, and every generation contributes thousands of pounds for its upkeep and embellishment. But regardless of who holds the procura of the church, the people regard it as their communal property, and all take an intense interest in its maintenance and decoration. Because of this proprietary interest, a difference of opinion over details of decoration, and especially over structural alterations to it, can divide a village into strongly opposed factions.

At the beginning of this century Kortin was divided on the question whether to enlarge the existing church or to build a new one. The stronger faction, which included the resident nobles and the wealthy merchants, wished to build a new church. Their leader was Sur Vincenz, the grandfather of Sur Gorg. A wealthy merchant was thought to be willing to help finance the scheme. This group was opposed by most of the village clergy, including the parish priest, on the ground that the cost of a new church was beyond the resources of the village. Moreover, a benefactor had already bequeathed £2,000 for enlarging the church. The leader of this faction was Dun Batist, the senior local priest in the village.

The dispute raged from about 1880, when the plans of the new church were drawn up, to about 1913. In 1898 a number of people

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

782 755 drinking from the spring of the grotto at Mellieha village where the Holy Virgin is venerated; or placing some earth on the sick person from the tomb of a hermit reputed to have died in odour of sanctity in Gozo (Vella Haber 1946, p. 16).

755 782 214 [204] Sometimes the donation of an 'ex-voto' was coupled with the publication, in a religious periodical, of the circumstances of the illness and its extraordinary cure. The following are typical case-histories, translated from Maltese, culled at random from such a periodical:

(i) Victoria Conti, who had been suffering from deafness in the right ear for four years, was told by two doctors that her condition was incurable. She prayed to the Holy Mary and as soon as she placed the oil from the sanctuary of Ta Pinu (Gharb, Gozo) on her ear she regained her hearing.

(ii) A woman fell from the balcony of her house and, as a result, had a series of convulsions, lost the faculty of speech, and became moribund. She remained in this precarious state for fifteen days when her parents promised the offer of a silver 'ex-voto' to the Holy Virgin if their daughter recovered. The following night the patient began to regain consciousness and to talk. She made steady progress and was well within a short time.

(iii) Joseph Spiteri, from Zabbar, had a mentally sick brother who, in a fit of frenzy, cut his throat. The doctor declared the case a hopeless one but, following a vow to the Mother of Christ, the patient began to improve until he recovered from his wound and from his mental illness within nine weeks.

(iv) Clo. Monsignier had measles and almost lost his eyesight as a complication. His mother vowed to the Virgin Mary that she would offer a silver 'ex-voto' in the shape of a pair of eyes if his sight was spared. Immediately this promise was made, the boy opened his eyes from which all the signs of disease had disappeared (*Id-devot lu Maria* 1894–9).

Other published accounts deal with cases of throat infections, puerperal sepsis, hyperpyrexia (up to 107° F), and trachoma. To appreciate the seriousness of these diseases up to thirty years ago, it must be remembered that the sulphonamide and the antibiotic eras had not yet dawned and that no effective therapy was yet available with the result that many patients with sepsis lost their lives and cases of trachoma ended in permanent blindness. Stories of accidents, such as falls from heights, scalding and involvement in vehicular traffic are also recorded. At times medical certificates over the signatures of prominent doctors were published as evidence of the gravity of the injury or illness sustained and of recovery therefrom (*Id-devot lu Maria*, 1887).

MEDICAL PAINTINGS

782 532 346 353 These are of various sizes ranging from 5 × 12 to 18 × 24 inches. They were much more numerous in the past than they are to-day. Church walls, which are now bare, were covered with these small canvases and wooden panels. A number of these 'ex-votos' vanished many years ago as in the case of the Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception of Qala in Gozo (Vella Haber 1946, p. 13). In other churches these pictures still existed in great numbers up to about thirty years ago but have now dwindled considerably, instances being those of the Cave chapel of the Annunciation and St Leonard at Minsija (Birkirkara), the church of Tal Mirakli (Lija), and Tal Hlas (Qormi). One of the sanc-

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

tuaries that remains particularly rich in painted 'ex-votos' is the church in the Tal Herba district (Birkirkara) erected in 1640 and dedicated to the Birth of the Holy Virgin. These panels are hung up, one above the other, almost up to the ceiling so that the following description written almost one hundred years ago still applies with regard to this particular church: 'On the walls one sees a considerable number of small paintings representing the favours received through the intercession of the Holy Virgin by those devotees who had recourse to her in their calamities' (Ferres 1866, p. 322). As far as could be ascertained the latest painting in this church is dated 1944.

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On the whole these pictures are the work of self-taught anonymous folk who never regarded themselves as artists but only as humble craftsmen. In fact their productions often ignore the rules of perspective while the colours and the shading are poor; but in viewing them one must take account of the fact that they were not intended to be decorative pieces. They were simply meant to be pictorial records of the occurrence of a medical emergency that was thought to be beyond human control and which ended happily in an extraordinary manner through a supernatural act. Indeed these pictures portray the moment in which the physician confesses that there is nothing that medical art and science can do to save the patient's life and the instant in which the Divine intervention occurs. Thus we behold the Holy Mary relieving a choking girl or rescuing a pedestrian from being crushed by the wheel of a carriage or see Our Lady stopping a run-away horse and saving its rider from harm (Plate 2, Fig. 2); or else softening the impact of the fall from a height of a stone-mason so that he reaches the ground uninjured; or sparing the life of a farmer from an enraged beast (Plate 2, Fig. 1). In this task of graphically reproducing an event, these paintings succeed very well.

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OTHER VOTIVE OFFERINGS

Other things offered for medical reasons consist of: (i) Surgical and orthopaedic appliances such as crutches, plaster jackets, leather corsets, iron splints, metal sutures, etc. (ii) Foreign bodies removed from organs such as stones from the kidneys, needles from fingers, hair-clips from the throat, swallowed thimble, etc. (iii) Babies' dresses, some of them embroidered with gold thread, are a characteristic feature of the Mellieha sanctuary. This custom of offering the child's clothing as a token for recovery from illness prevailed also in connexion with the tomb of the Holy Hermit Kurraw at the Qala sanctuary in Gozo. The grateful mothers of sick children used to deposit the clothing of their offspring on the hermit's grave as a sign that the disease had been transferred from the children's bodies on to their clothing (Vella Haber 1946, p. 14). Babies' dresses are also offered in thanksgiving for an uneventful delivery and the birth of a normal infant. (iv) Wax tapers, decorated torches and bottles of olive oil for lighting the sanctuary lamp. (v) Sums of money. (vi) Jewellery is the most common 'ex-voto' to be seen to-day in Maltese churches. There are gold necklaces, finger-rings, brooches and other items of personal adornment. Apart from their intrinsic value, most of these gold ornaments represent the most prized possessions which the votary had to offer because they formed the most substantial part of a woman's dowry. To give an idea of the quantity of these valuable articles deposited in one single shrine during a month's time, here is a list, chosen at random from a religious periodical published in 1894: 'Sixteen gold rings, one pair of gold ear-rings with diamonds, two silver bracelets, a gold watch and a

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1/1, 2/1 [see plate II, facing p. 25-An.]

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

796 [541] There is also on each occasion a liberal display of fireworks on the evening before the feast day, with the usual amount of noise and glare, and several bands, civic and military, play choice selections of music to the great delight of the large concourse of persons assembled.

[346] [353] [794] The interior of the churches is always most beautifully and gracefully decorated for the occasion of the festival, and the inhabitants of each town or village are always vying with each other in contributing large sums of money for the purpose of decorating the church of the parish to which they belong. In most cases the feast day closes with a procession followed by the image of the Blessed Virgin, or that of the Saint who is being honoured, carried on the shoulders of some eight or ten men.

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
EZ6 Malta EZ6

[Frontispiece, facing Title Page]

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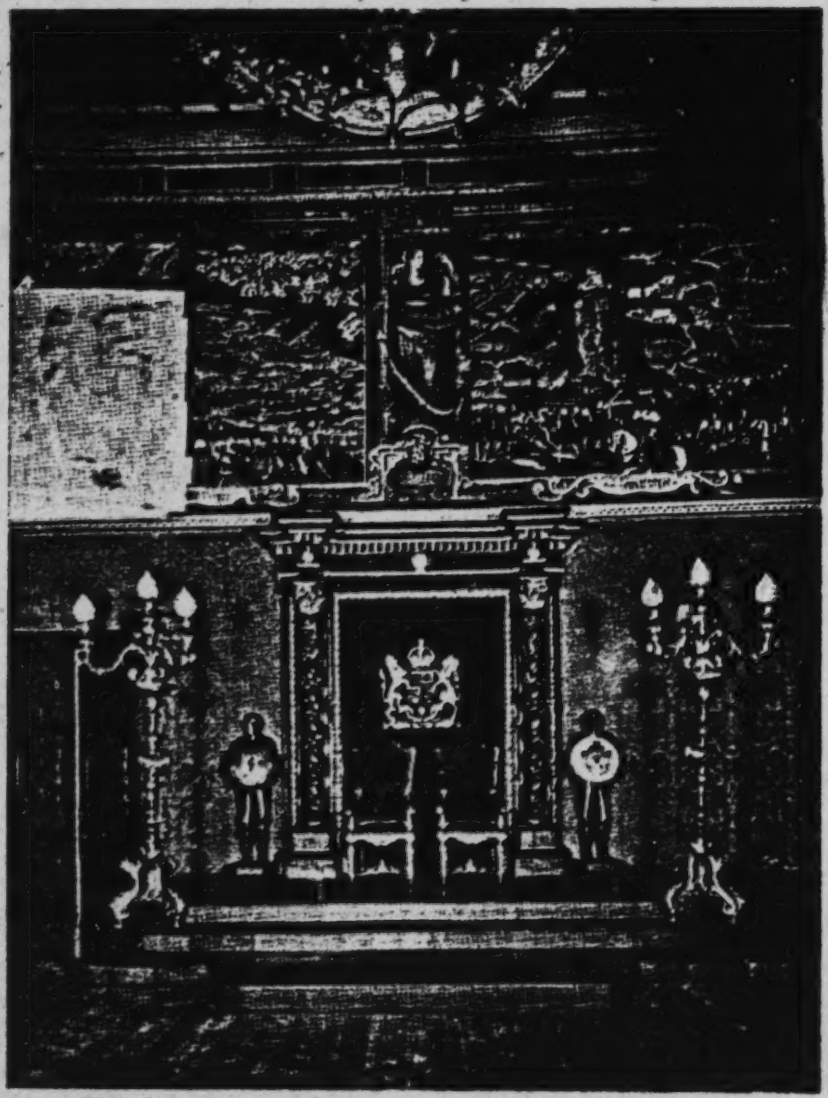

THE PALACE, VALETTA: THRONE IN HALL OF S. MICHAEL AND S. GEORGE

Above, portions of the frescoes depicting the Great Siege. The patch over the fresco to the left of the throne covers temporarily the portion of it damaged by bombing.

Fr.

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
EZ6 Malta EZ6

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VALETTA: AUBERGE DE CASTILE
[See p. 60.]

MAIN ROOM OF THE AUBERGE DE PROVENCE (NOW THE MALTA NATIONAL MUSEUM) WHEN USED AS THE COFFEE-ROOM OF THE UNION CLUB
[See pp. 60 and 63.]

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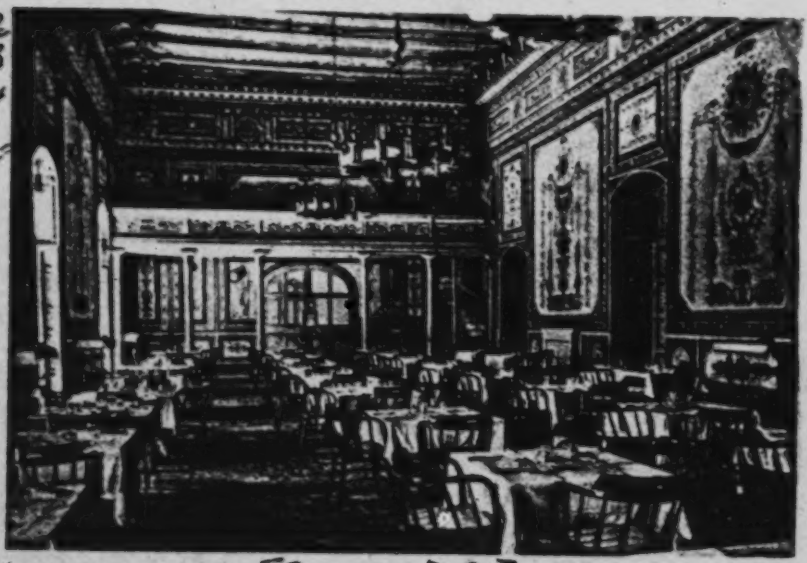

[facing P. 81]

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
EZ6 Malta EZ6

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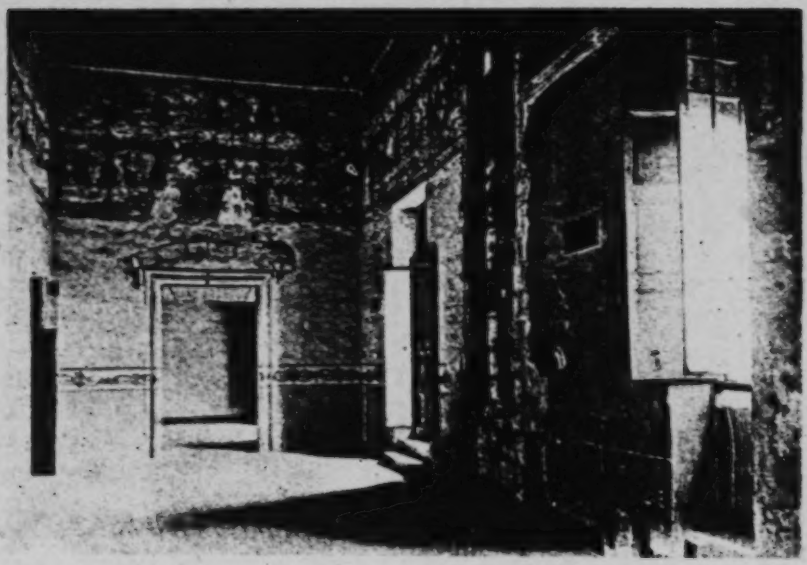
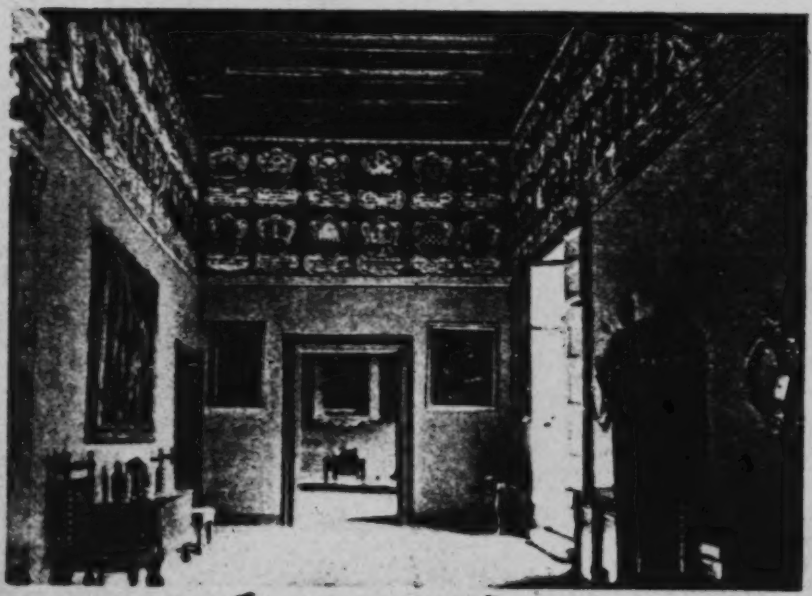


A ROOM IN THE INQUISITOR'S PALACE, VITTORIOSA, BEFORE AND AFTER RESTORATION

[See pp. 99 and 140.]



[facing P. 105]

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
EZ6 Malta EZ6

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BALCONY OF THE RESTORED BONDI PALACE, GOZO, FROM THE ENTRANCE INTO THE CITADEL
[*See pp.* 141–142 *and* 222.]

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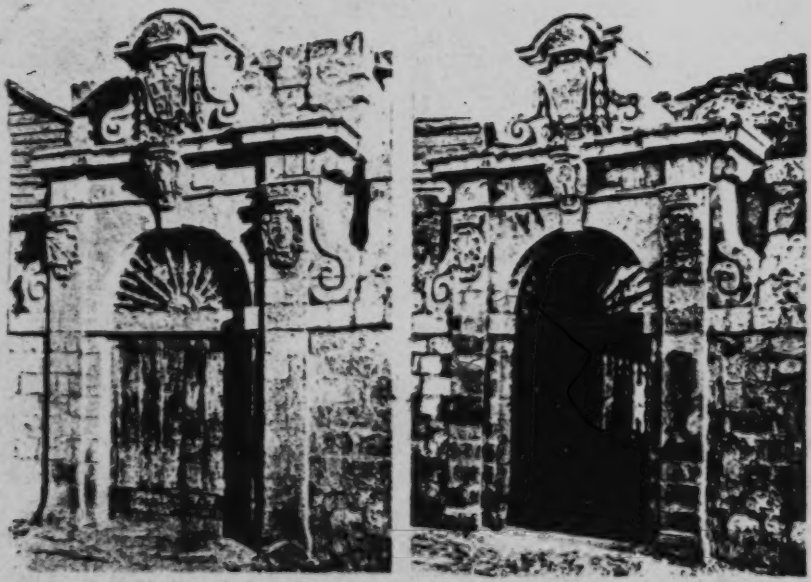

A MONTE DI REDENZIONE GATEWAY NEAR KALAMISTRA, BEFORE AND AFTER RECONDITIONING
[*See p.* 141.]

[facing P. 128]

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
EZ6 Malta EZ6

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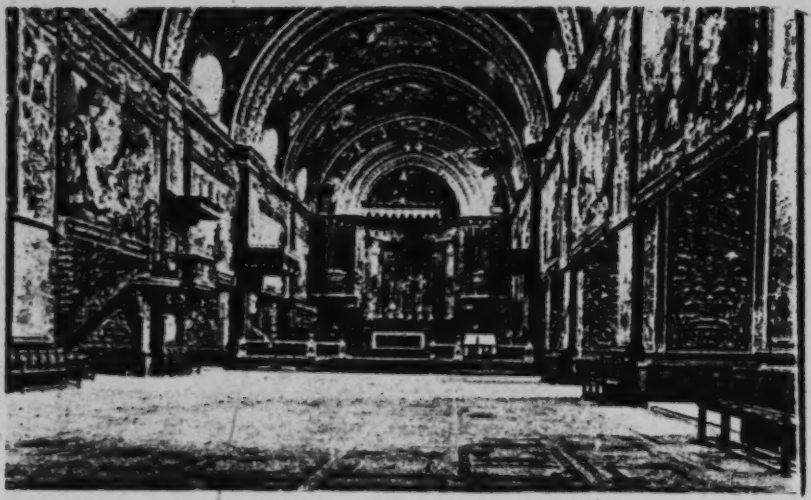

NAVE OF S. JOHN'S, VALETTA, WITH ITS TAPESTRIES DISPLAYED
[*See pp.* 177–180.]

BEHEADING OF S. JOHN THE BAPTIST, BY CARAVAGGIO, IN THE ORATORY OF S. JOHN'S, VALETTA
[*See pp.* 242–243.]

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[facing P. 129]

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
EZ6 Malta EZ6

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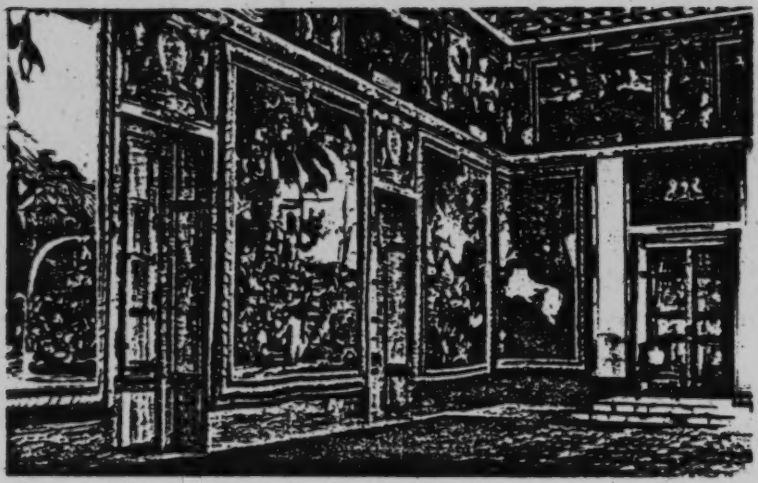

THE PALACE, VALETTA: A CORNER OF THE TAPESTRY CHAMBER (FORMERLY THE COUNCIL CHAMBER)

[*See pp.* 182 *and* 184–186.]

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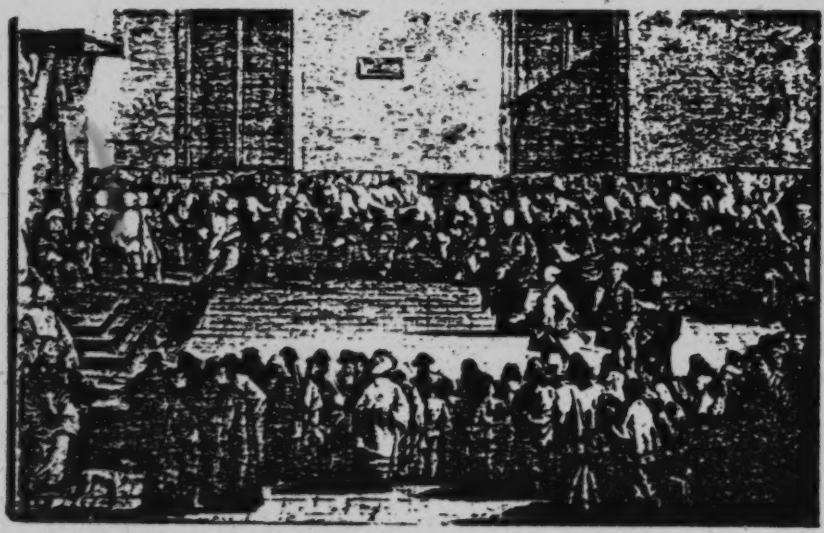

DEPUTATION OF THE PATRICIATE OF UDINE ARGUING BEFORE G.M. PINTO AND HIS CHAPTER-GENERAL IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER OF THE PALACE, VALETTA

By Giambattista Tiepolo.

[*See pp.* 181–182.]

[Facing P. 144]